

# Chapter 1

---

## What Is Normal, Anyway?

A year and a half ago, five minutes into my sixth grade math class at Bluff K-12 School, my average little life began to fall apart. It started innocently enough. A student office runner came in and handed a yellow note to the teacher. She frowned and then asked me to go to the office.

“Try not to miss the whole period, Abi. We’re reviewing for Friday’s test.”

“Nice of her to broadcast to the whole sixth grade class how stupid I am in math,” I grumbled under my breath as I followed the runner back to the office. I was wondering if it was another mix-up about transferring my school records up here to Alaska from my school in California. I didn’t get nervous until I walked into the school counselor’s tiny office and saw both my mother and the principal squeezed into kindergartener sized chairs next to each other.

The counselor offered me an itty bitty orange chair and then glanced at my mother. My mother answered him with a tense little shake of her head. Too upset to speak. Bad sign. The counselor took a deep breath and opened his mouth.

“You will need to go up to the Hospital with your mother, Abigail,” the principal blurted. “They will explain everything to you up there,” she said, standing up abruptly. The counselor looked confused.

“Is Dad hurt?” I shrieked, jumping out of my chair, my stomach lurching into my throat and then dropping down again when my mother shook her head at me.

“No, no, no,” the counselor said in a soothing voice. “Please sit down, Abi.” He turned to the principal.

“I’ll talk with them,” he said quietly. “It’s okay. I’ll brief you afterwards.” I felt like I was going to explode.

“What’s going on?” I whispered to my mom through clenched teeth, as the principal slipped out, looking relieved. Mom opened her mouth but she couldn’t seem to find the words and this time it was the counselor who jumped in. He said that the youth pastor at my church was being investigated for sexual behavior with children and that the police had found pictures in his apartment that appeared to be child pornography.

Some of the pictures were of me. I could feel my face getting hot and my brain didn’t seem to be working very well. Sexual behavior? Child pornography? I wasn’t even sure what pornography meant, just that it was bad. I was wearing clothes the whole time. Phil told me he was taking pictures for a friend who had a modeling company. The counselor explained that the police wanted to interview me at the hospital.

### What Kind of People Abuse?

People who sexually abuse children come from all ethnic and racial groups. They can be male or female, rich or poor, homosexual or heterosexual, married or single<sup>1</sup>.

*I sure didn’t think Phil would turn out to be a criminal! Abi*



### What Is Sexual Abuse?

Child sexual abuse can include both physical contact and non-physical contact. There are different definitions for sexual abuse, but they all come down to the same thing. It is wrong for adults or teenagers to be sexual with children. It is wrong and it is the older person’s responsibility to stop it from happening. No grownup has the right to be sexual with a child, ever, no matter what their relationship with that child.

I got my coat and boots from my locker and my mother drove me up to the hospital. She was wearing her robot-mom face and she kept starting to ask me things in an angry tone of voice and then stopping herself.

“What were you....”

“How could you have...”

I had questions too, but it didn’t seem like a particularly good time. The hospital was on a big open bluff overlooking the river. We hurried from the car, huddling against the wind and snow. A tall woman met us at the door. She helped us pull the door shut and smiled at me. “Dreadful out, isn’t it? You must be Abigail. I’m Elaine, your advocate from Women’s Resources.”

She said that her job was to help and support me. Part of me felt like saying “Whatever,” but I didn’t. She took us to a room that looked like a doctor’s office except for the basket of dolls and stuffed animals in the corner. While we waited there she told us that a nurse and a cop would be asking me questions about what happened with Phil, and then the nurse would give me a physical exam. She said that if I felt uncomfortable with anything that was happening in the interview I should speak up and let them know. I was about to ask why they would have to examine me since Phil barely even touched me, when the nurse and police officer showed up. My mother had to wait in the next room while they talked to me. They were tape recording the whole thing.



I told them about how Phil had said he was going to send the pictures to a modeling company. His closet was full of gorgeous outfits. He kept encouraging me to put on different ones and do sexy poses. I didn't tell them everything. I didn't tell them he said that I was "stunning," or that I knew some of the fancy outfits were way too skimpy. He was always really polite and only touched me occasionally, like when he was adjusting a strap on my shoulder or helping with a zipper. I didn't tell them I felt kind of uncomfortable about it, but I didn't want to stop because it was exciting and fun. Sometimes I imagined I was practicing to be on MTV. It felt like a weird thing to be doing with a youth pastor, but I never thought of it as sexual abuse. It started out not weird at all, and at first he never touched me.

After they asked a lot of questions, the cop wanted me to let the nurse examine me, to see if Phil had left any marks on me. It was like they didn't believe me that he had barely touched me. I told them I didn't want to take my clothes off. They showed me a stupid little video with puppets in it about how the exam wasn't any big deal. The nurse tried to convince me she just wanted to make sure I was okay. When I kept saying no, they finally gave up.

**Myth: It wasn't abuse unless there was sexual intercourse or force was used.**

**Fact:** People who offend sexually use many tricky behaviors to trap or lure kids into situations they can't control. Some of the tricks include threats, pressure, bullying, lies, bribes, and grooming (saying and doing things specifically meant to make you feel comfortable around them so that you are easier to abuse later). They may do this in person, or even over the internet in chat rooms.



My mom told my father about it as soon as he got home from work. I could make out the swear words he was shouting even though my bedroom is upstairs and I had my door shut. I couldn't face him. That was the first Worst Day of My Life (WDOML #1).

WDOML #2 was the next week, after the Bluff weekly newspaper had an article about Phil and all the things he was accused of doing. Even though my name wasn't in the article, somehow everybody seemed to know I was involved. I guess that's what happens in a small town, but it sure took me by surprise.

### **A Physical Exam**

When sexual abuse includes touching or having sex, it can leave tiny marks, tears, or other signs on a person's body. If you were touched under your clothing during sexual abuse, you may be asked to have a physical exam.

*If you want to read more about physical exams you can look on page 206. Abi*

The other thing that shocked me was that kids were saying that Jessica Cornfield was the person who had told on him. They said that she had gone to the school counselor and told him that Phil had been molesting her. The school counselor called the police.



### **How Can You Get Help When You've Been Abused?**

Since there are rarely any physical signs of sexual abuse, there may be no way of getting help without actually telling someone about the abuse. Even when a therapist, social worker, or police officer suspects sexual abuse, it isn't something that they can address well without hearing it directly from the person who was abused. This is a heavy and unfair burden. If you have been abused, it would be natural to feel angry\* about the whole situation. Not only were you abused, but, now to get help healing, you have to get up the nerve to tell someone about it!

*\*or confused or ashamed. . . Abi*

### **What If You Can't Say It Out Loud or Aren't Believed?**

It is hard work to tell about being abused. Many people who have been abused never tell at all. You are reading this book, so most likely you have already told someone. Whoever you told, you did a good and brave thing. If you have not yet told an adult, sometimes drawing, singing, or running it out can help get around the words that can get stuck in your throat. If you tell and aren't believed, keep telling until someone believes you and helps you. You deserve that help and belief. If you don't want to talk to someone in person, you can call Child Help USA. Their number is **1-800-4ACHILD**, or **1-800-422-4453**. The call is free and it won't show up on your regular phone bill (but it will show up on a cell phone bill). The person who answers your call can help you to find the right people to help you.



The thing is, at the time I despised Jessica. She was a big girl (I thought of her as fat back then), with stringy blond hair. She was always curled around a book or writing in her notebook. Every time she laughed, which she would do if anybody tried to talk to her, her hand flew up to cover her mouth. She was sort of friendly to me at church when I first moved to Bluff, but I was pretty cold toward her. I didn't really want to be associated with her. On WDOML #2 it seemed like every whispered conversation featured Jessica and me. I wanted to die.

A lot has happened since that day. I stopped numbering the worst days (after WDOML #25). It hasn't all been bad. I don't hate Jessica anymore. I certainly don't hate Alaska anymore. I don't even hate myself anymore. I wish I could go back in time and tell my sixth grade self the things I know now. That's why I'm writing this book. I want something good to come out of all that mess. I can't fix what happened, but maybe what I learned could help someone else.

Maybe other girls won't have to feel quite so lonely and confused, if they read about all my weird thoughts and feelings. I've been doing a lot of writing anyway, because writing stuff down helps me figure out what I'm feeling and sometimes even why.

I'm no expert, but there are facts along with the story in case you want more information about certain things. Some are handouts from the group I was in, and some are things I looked up, or found out from my therapist. In the back of the book is a glossary for any words you don't understand. One of the most important things I learned is that I am a whole and complete person. I have a core self inside, even though I didn't used to believe it. When I am caring and compassionate toward myself and others, I am acting from that part of me – my truest self. I still have parts that get triggered by memories of the abuse, or by other people's stories of abuse. At times I need help from my therapist when I get overwhelmed by the parts of myself that are still angry or scared. My smallest (youngest) and most vulnerable parts want to run away and hide sometimes, but I have learned how to protect them and be a true friend to myself.



### **The Importance of Telling**

Telling someone about sexual abuse is scary. You wonder how they will react and what will happen afterwards. But living with the memories and feelings about sexual abuse can continue to hurt you. If you haven't told about being abused, think about people you could tell. Perhaps you have a friend or family member, a teacher, or a priest who cares about you and who is a good listener. It is okay to say: "Could I please talk with you privately?"

